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WILLIAM POPE.L DISCUSSES HIS ARTFORUM COVER AT CAA: ‘LEAVE ME OUT OF IT’

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At the start of her talk with William Pope.L at the College Art Association conference on Friday, part of the “Annual Distinguished Artists” interview series, MoMA PS1 curator Jenny Schlenzka told Pope.L that she was happy to be speaking to him.

“Well I’m happy to be a distinguished artist,” Pope.L replied, to laughter. “FINALLY.”

The hour-and-a-half-long talk covered many elements of Pope.L’s work, including his best-known performance pieces, and lingered on a more recent development in the

artist’s career: his appearance on the February cover of *Artforum*, a photograph of a performance in which he appears to be suffocating in a plastic bag titled *Foraging (Asphyxia Version)* (1993–95/2008).

“I have a very divided take about being on the cover of *Artforum*,” said Pope.L, who is black. “That’s something I’m supposed to want. All artist are supposed to want that. It’s really funny when you get what you want and you have no idea what it is. You have fantasies about these things, and you get drunk and you talk about these things. ‘Oh, my Guggenheim show, we’ll get drunk and we’ll be in the back with our friends.’ It’s never like that.”

“Eric Garner’s death, or Trayvon Martin’s, or Michael Brown’s, those deaths are much larger than my career,” he said. If he decides to represent them as an artist, that’s one thing, but when *Artforum* decides to raise the issue on their cover—“It was one of the first times I’ve ever seen a topical cover... No, really, I’ve never missed an issue in 50 years”—things become more complicated. “It’s troubling,” he said.

“They actually clarified it for me,” he added. “They don’t let you know if you’re going to be on the cover, that’s what they said to me.”

“It’s a kinda cool thing,” he continued. “If you’re going to go out and try to talk about domestic issues, something in our American community that a lot of us are thinking about, but yet you’re not going to engage the artist? Why not shift the policy a little? It’s only one issue. It’s not like you can’t go back to the old policy. And I probably would have told them, ‘Well how are you going to do this?’ And they [would have] said, ‘Well, we’re going to have a little four-page article.’” He paused here to nod skeptically, indicating that this wasn’t enough (David Joselit’s piece in the issue is only four pages, at some 1,400 words, though there is also a book review of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* that focuses on stop-and-frisk). “Sometimes they do these things where they have a panel of people talking about a topic and this is something where I thought more voices would have been helpful. A lot of smart people write for *Artforum*! Why not have a bunch of those people—they do this all the time—comment on one thing? The year in art. They do that shit all the time. Why not Eric Garner?”

“So,” he shrugged, “leave me out of it.”

But then, it’s hard to talk about race, and Pope.L is never one to pull punches.

“Should we talk about race?” Schlenzka asked.

“I’ve never had that happen!” Pope.L said. “Had a white person ask, ‘Should we talk about race?’ Usually it just happens, and then it’s like, ‘Oh. Maybe we shouldn’t have.’”

“We can also easily talk about sexuality,” Schlenzka said, playfully.

At this Pope.L growled several times, long enough to give Schlenzka, and her baby bump, time to shift in her seat.

“How did you get pregnant?” he asked, kindly.

If all of this makes it sound like they didn’t get along, nothing could be further from the truth! The two were ebullient on the topic of Pope.L’s crawls, his most famous *The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street*, a piece in which he climbed up and down all of Broadway in a Superman costume while lying on a skateboard. Pope.L has recently started to give lessons in his style of crawling, just finished a group performance, in fact, in Sweden. Crawls were actually always supposed to be a group activity, he said. He simply could never find anyone to do them with him.

“You see New York from a very odd vantage point,” he said. “And you do have a sense of melting, inside. I don’t know what it is. The closest thing I can think of is when you do a sport. Running. At a certain point you hit the wall. Crawling, I hit the wall earlier. But I have so much farther to go.”

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